

BIRD SURVEY - FIELDHOUSE AND TOWNFOOT

REPORT FOR NOVEMBER 2022 TO JULY 2023

This Survey is carried out by members of the Alnwick Wildlife Group.

The report covers the fourteen years of the survey.

Aims of the survey

The survey is aimed at assessing the effects on the wild bird population made by Northumberland Estates' gamekeeping and farm management, in an area of mainly arable land, which is under an Agricultural Environmental Scheme. Fieldhouse and Townfoot farms are part of an area where an attempt is being made to encourage the Grey Partridge population to a point where some sustainable shooting can be carried out.

Methodology

In order to make comparative counts as accurate as possible, recording is carried out by walking the same routes and spending the same time at each visit. Six visits are made each year. In the winter period these are in Nov. Jan. and Feb. and monthly during the breeding period from late April to early July.

Visits are made on days which are not too windy or wet, when observation is much more difficult and comparative counts are impossible. Recording is carried out by visual observation or song and call recognition. Although all species are recorded, the "target" species for the survey are those which normally feed and breed on arable land and the adjoining hedges and hedgerow trees and are most likely to be affected. Also included are those predators which may have some effect on these populations, e.g. Sparrowhawk and Buzzard etc.

General Observations

The survey is affected by many factors. Some of which are the continuing changes made to the farming rotation and the increase and repositioning of some game plots which alter the habitats covered by the survey routes. These changes are in themselves of interest and show that in the case of Lapwing, for instance, that the nesting area can follow favoured conditions e.g. spring-sown crops or bare stubble. If none of these are available the local population is severely reduced as they move further away. An added complication is that, if spring cultivations are delayed by weather conditions, many early nests can be destroyed, reducing their breeding success.

The habitats on Townfoot and Fieldhouse are different. Townfoot has more hedges and hedgerow trees for cover and nesting than Fieldhouse which includes the large more open area of the old airfield. The difference is illustrated by the counts of some of the target species. Numbers of Blackbirds, Chaffinch and Dunnock etc. are usually much higher at

Townfoot. The area of the old airfield at Fieldhouse, which in the early years of the survey was a suitable habitat for Curlew, Lapwing and Meadow pipit, is now being changed to a more intensive arable rotation, to their detriment.

Looking back through the records, Corn Bunting have been recorded twice at Fieldhouse. In April 2011 and April 2018. Both were of singing males and probably only single birds. Corn Bunting have become very rare sightings in the North.

Achieving the Aims

The aims of the survey will only be achieved if a reasonable comparison can be made between the results of this survey and average populations in similar arable areas. An attempt is being made to do this. More useful information is now available from BTO and it is hoped that the conclusions made will be increasingly accurate. The most important factor is the comparison of counts during the breeding period.

Graphs

Graphs can easily mislead. Six visits each year produce only a small amount of data on which to base any conclusions, taking into account all the vagaries of weather and the many other changing conditions which can affect counts.

A graph and details of winter counts for Curlew are included in this report.

An interesting exercise is to compare the graphs in this report with those produced by BTO at www.bto.org/bbs-graphs

Breeding Period Records of Target Species

The counts of the target species from both farms are totalled and graphs produced from these results. To achieve the aims of the survey we are attempting to make a comparison between our figures and national averages produced by BTO. from the annual results of several of their National Breeding bird surveys,

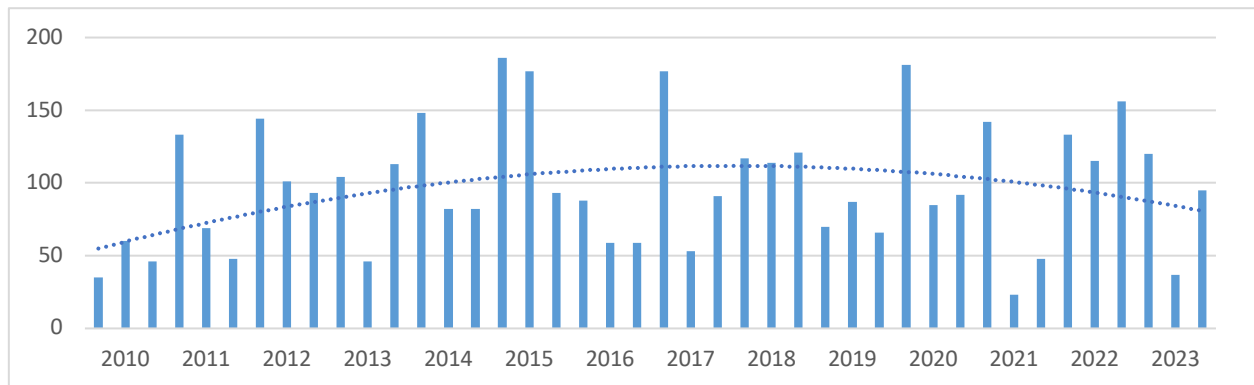
Falling populations of many British birds in recent years have resulted in the grouping of species into three bands: -

- Green.** For those not endangered.
- Amber.** Those for which there is some concern.
- Red.** For those at greatest risk.

BTO National figures give: -

- (A)** an average % rise or fall over the period 1995 - 2021
- (B)** an estimated % rise or fall over the period 2021 - 2022

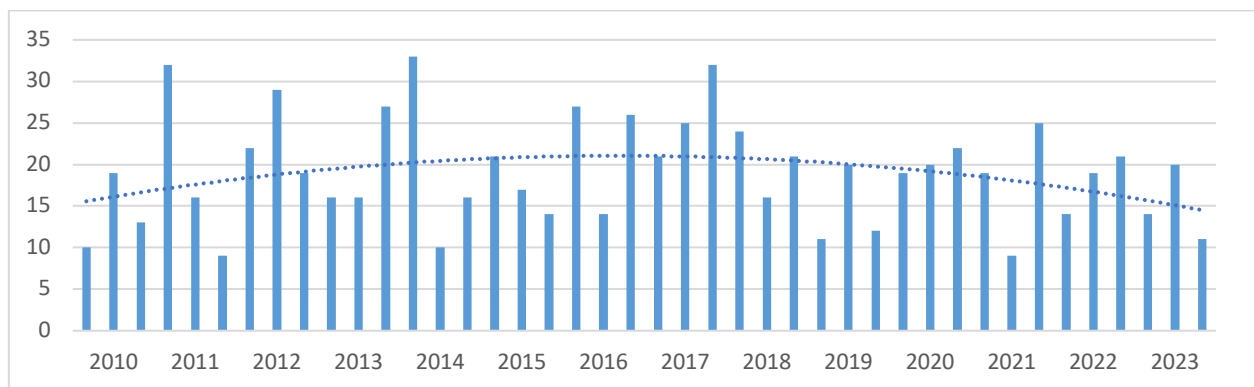
Woodpigeon



High numbers of Woodpigeons can be damaging to some agricultural crops and cause considerable losses, particularly to oil seed rape in the winter and cereal crops as they ripen towards harvest time. Improved hedges provide better breeding sites for Woodpigeons and numbers remain high. It seems very surprising that they have been moved from being Green Listed to Amber.

Amber listed (A) +35% (B) -3%

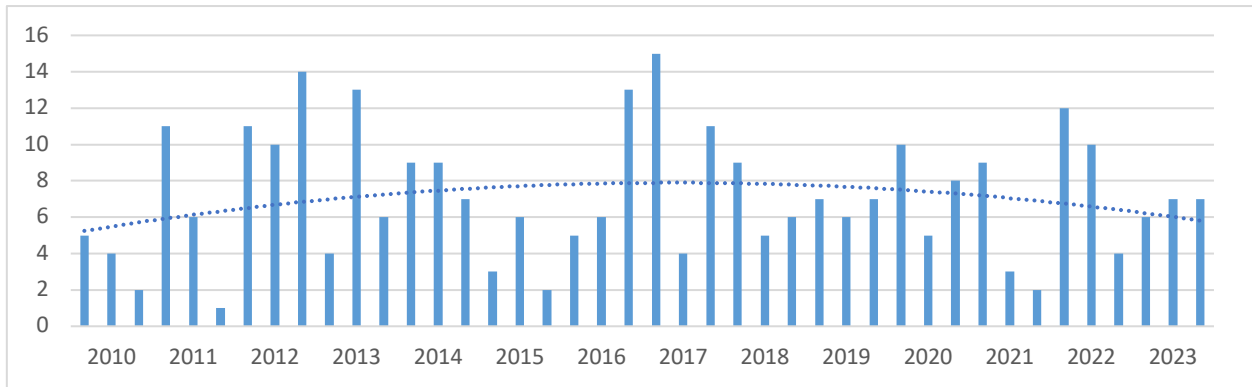
Skylark



National figures show a continual drop in Skylark numbers over a long period, particularly in arable areas. Counts, particularly on the more open parts of Fieldhouse farm, show that numbers have not fallen here but changes in cropping may well influence numbers in the future with grassland being replaced by arable crops.

Red listed (A) -16% (B) +2%

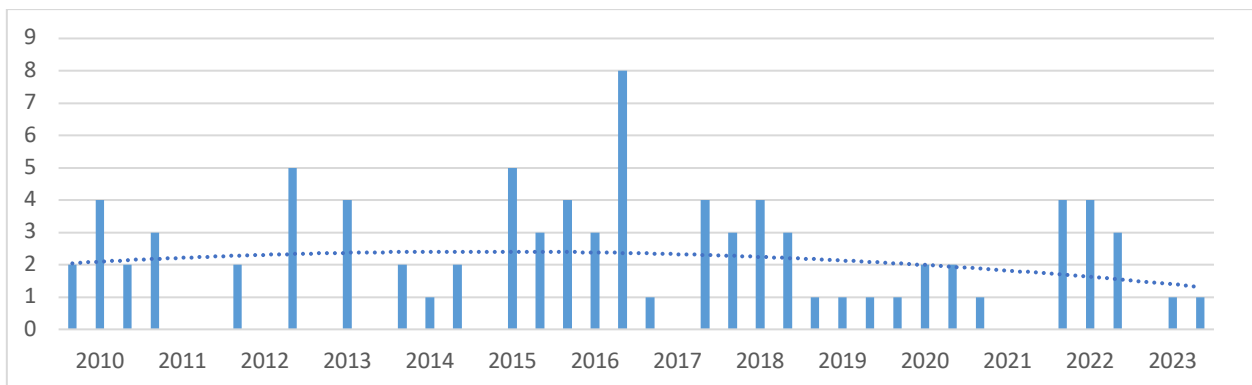
Dunnock



The national increase in previous years is due to their spread into areas in the west. Dunnocks have been recorded in consistent numbers in the survey area during the last few years.

Amber listed (A) +7% (B) -4%

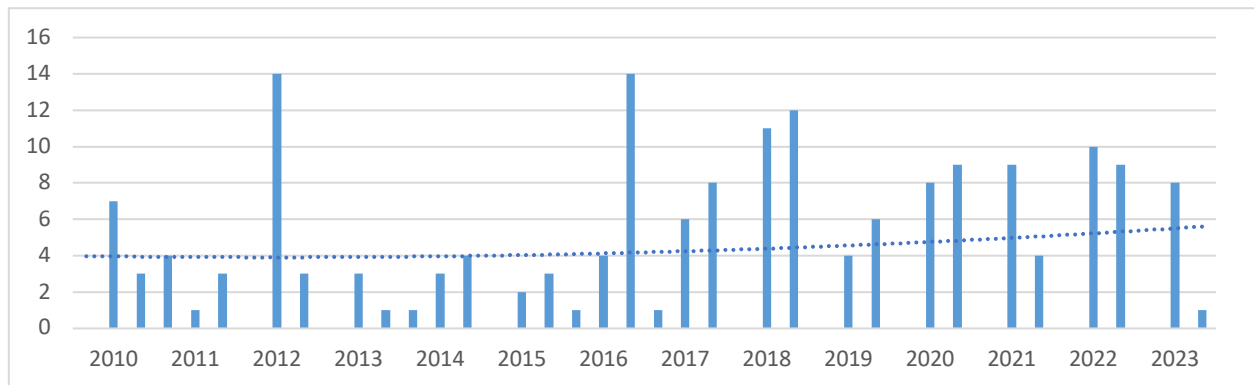
Robin



Counts of the Robin population are very variable. They can be very secretive during the breeding season and not easy to spot when hedges are in full leaf. I suspect that the population may be higher than the records suggest. National counts show an increase in recent years. Much higher counts are made in the winter surveys. See the winter graph.

Green listed (A) +30% (B) -4%

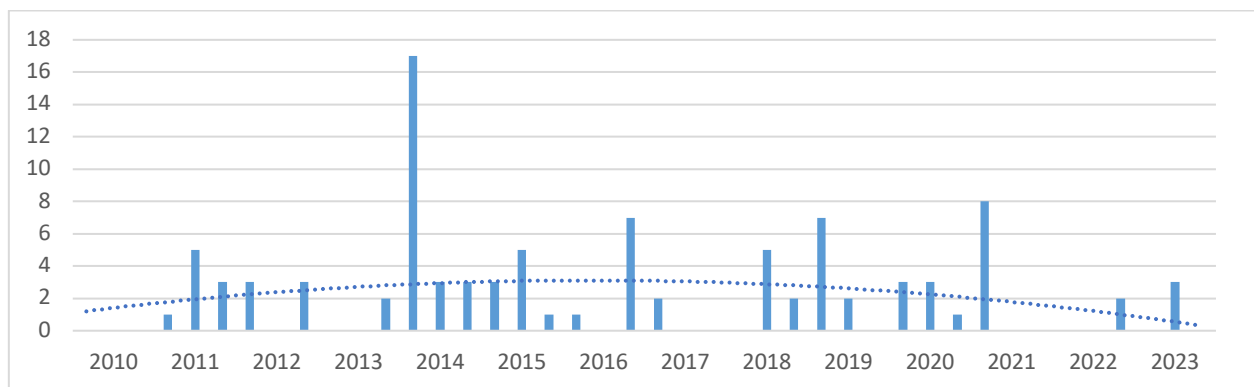
Whitethroat



Whitethroats are the only true summer visitor included in the target list. The population in our survey area depends, not only on the conditions here but also on those in their wintering habitats in Africa, and during movements to and fro. Whitethroats are therefore not a good indicator of the effects of any management in this country alone. The denser hedges of Townfoot are proving to be more attractive to Whitethroats than the more open areas of Fieldhouse. There is a small but regular count, which has increased in recent years. Zero counts in the first visit of most years have been made before their return from wintering in Africa. The increase here appears to be better than the National Average.

Amber listed (A) +17% (B) -1%

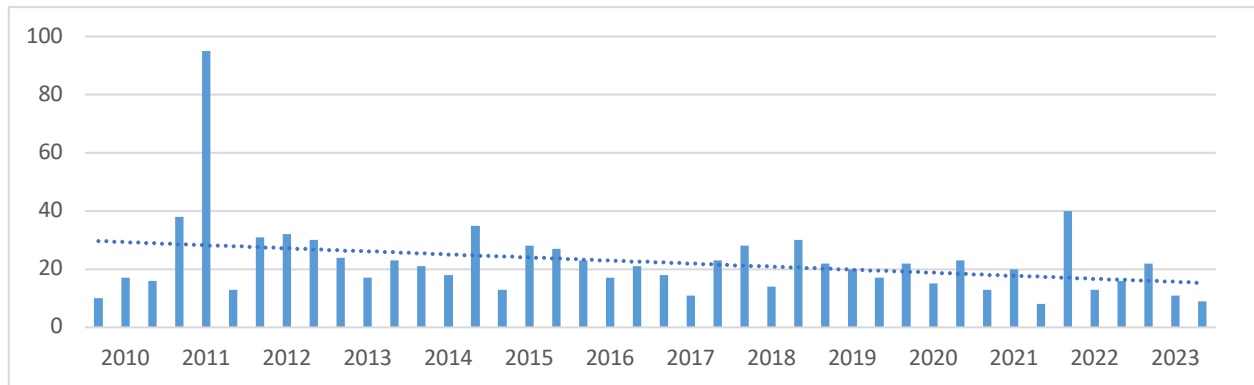
Tree Sparrow



In the years leading up to 2000 breeding Tree Sparrows were scarce. Increasing numbers from the continent wintering on the East coast in subsequent years appeared to give a boost to the numbers left to breed in the area. This graph shows a very small number breeding in the survey area. The one high count in the first visit of 2014 is of flocking birds before their breeding season had started and distorts the graph.

Red listed (A) +31% (B) -19%

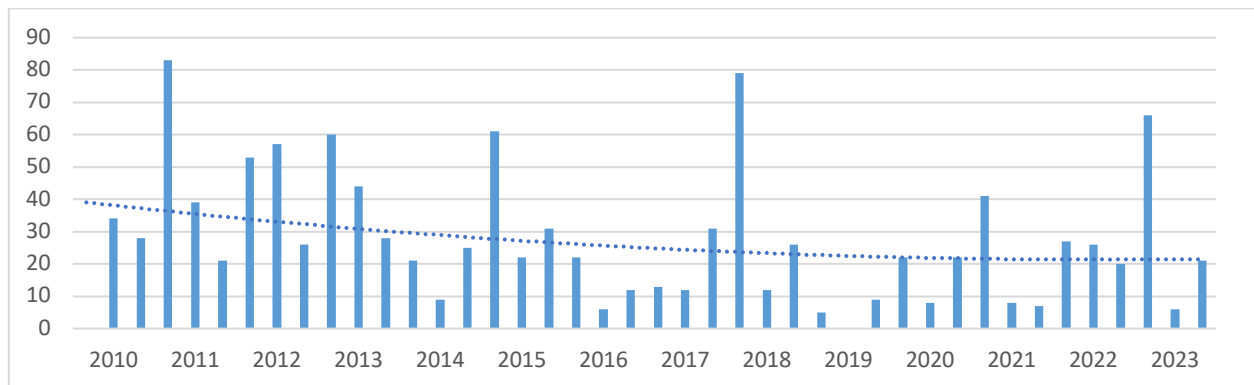
Chaffinch



The Chaffinch is, like the Blackbird, one of the commonest species in the survey area and is therefore important in monitoring the effects of the Estate management. So far, the counts show a good population with very little change. This is better than the national average which is declining at a faster rate.

Green listed (A) -38% (B) -8%

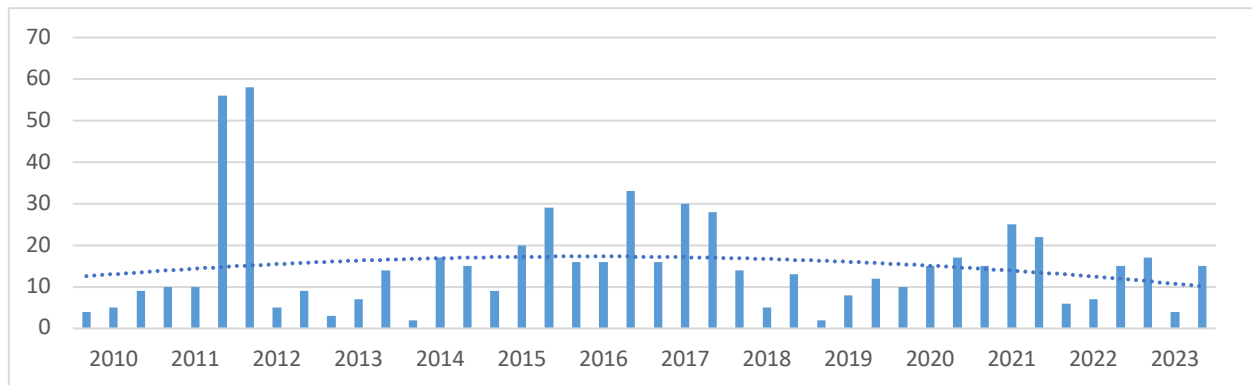
Linnet



This survey has had a higher population of Linnets than other arable areas but numbers are now declining along with the national average.

Red listed (A) -27% (B) -10%

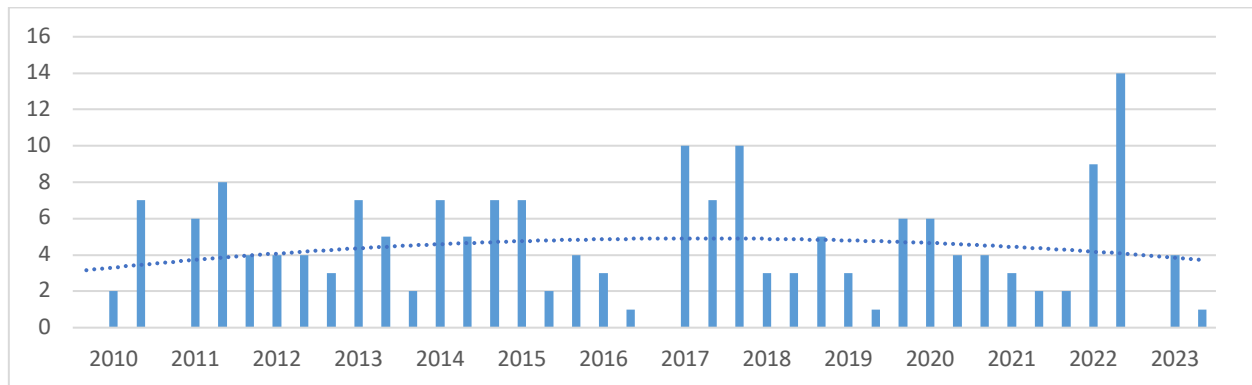
Goldfinch



The high numbers of Goldfinches in late 2011 will probably be birds flocking together after breeding and be mainly juveniles. In early 2012 the higher count will be of a similar group but prior to dispersing to their breeding territories. These two high counts distort the true trend which shows a very slight fall in numbers which follows the national average. Before the 1960's Goldfinch were hardly ever seen in the north but quite quickly increased to be one of the commonest finches in the area.

Green listed (A) +143% (B) +2%

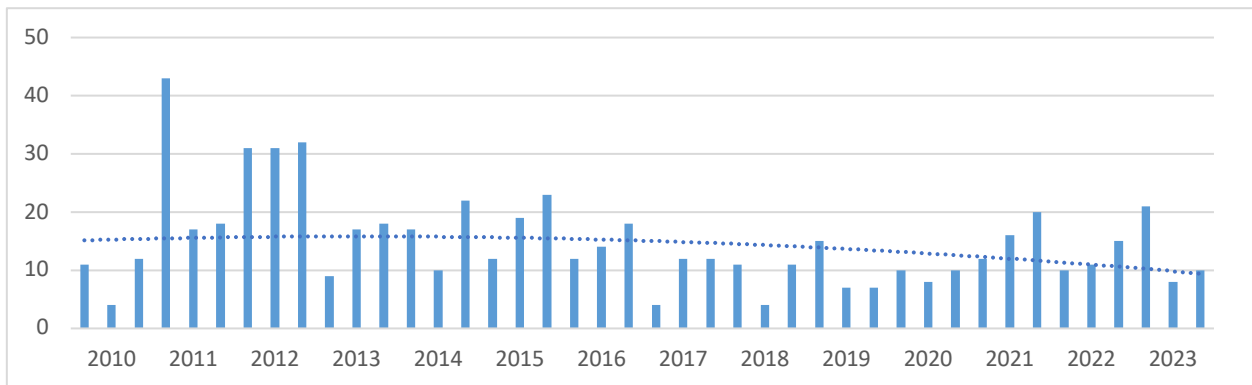
Reed Bunting



This shows a regular small population of Reed Bunting, mainly along the river Aln at Townfoot which is one of the few suitable habitats on these survey routes. In the North East there has been a small increase during the last twenty years. Improved counts were made at the later visits in 2017 but much lower in 2018/19, in line with national averages. More sightings are being made of Reed Buntings moving away from habitats near water to make use of Oil Seed Rape crops for breeding.

Amber listed (A) +32% (B) -4%

Yellowhammer



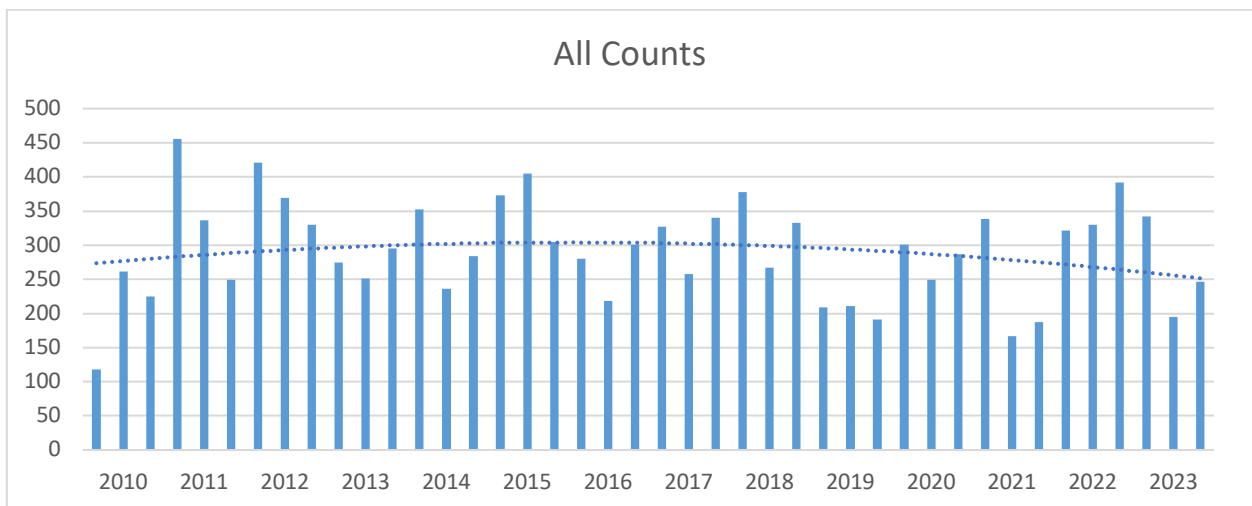
There have been irregular counts of Yellowhammers but on average the population here is performing better than the national trend which is falling. They are closely associated with cereal growing areas and the highest populations are on the east of the country.

Red listed

(A) -34%

(B) -6%

Total of All Breeding Period Counts (Target Species)



Total counts are showing a slight decline during the 14 years of the survey.

Conclusions.

These results suggest that during the course of these surveys ten of the target species are performing better than the National Averages. It is satisfying to note that four of these are Red listed and three are Amber listed.

Grey Partridge (Red listed)
Lapwing (Red listed)
Buzzard
Song Thrush (Amber listed)
Skylark (Red listed)
Yellowhammer (Red listed)
Chaffinch
Whitethroat (Amber listed)
Woodpigeon (Amber listed)
Blackbird.

Seven species have maintained similar counts to the National Averages.

Dunnock (Amber listed)
Goldfinch
Reed Bunting (Amber Listed)
Linnet (Red Listed)
Wren (Amber listed) Very weather related.
Pheasant
Robin.

Two species have Lower counts than the National Averages.

Tree Sparrow (Red listed)
Meadow Pipit (Amber listed) Loss of local habitat.

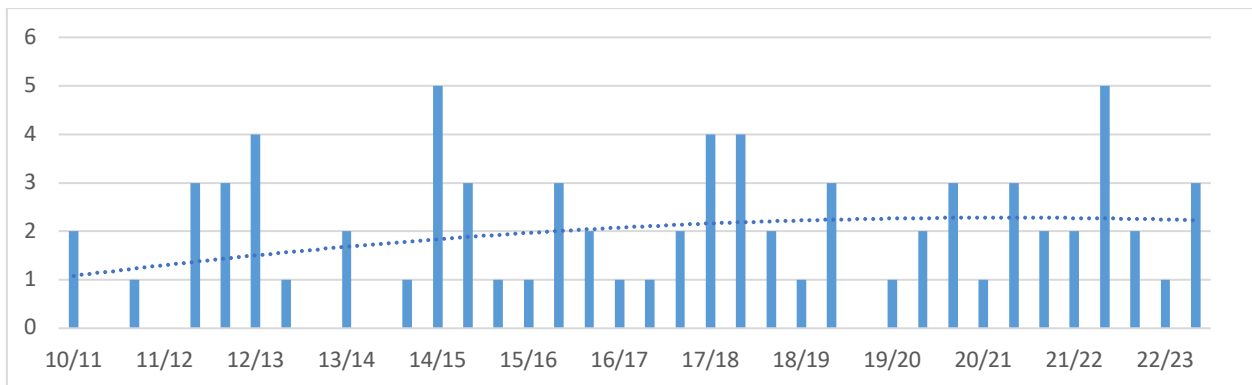
Winter Period Records

Most winter records are more irregular than those of the breeding period, being determined by weather, food availability and shelter, etc. Graphs have been produced for those of the target species which are winter residents and may have some bearing on the results of the survey. Winter migrants often add to or replace the local breeding species, which move further south in winter. No graphs have been prepared for the following species as insufficient data is available.

- Kestrel. Few sightings.
- Sparrow Hawk. Few sightings.

- Skylark. Mainly move away from the area in winter.
- Meadow Pipit. As the Skylark.
- Mistle Thrush. Small numbers.
- Lapwing. Only three records of groups, usually when there is more severe weather affecting their wintering areas nearer the coast.

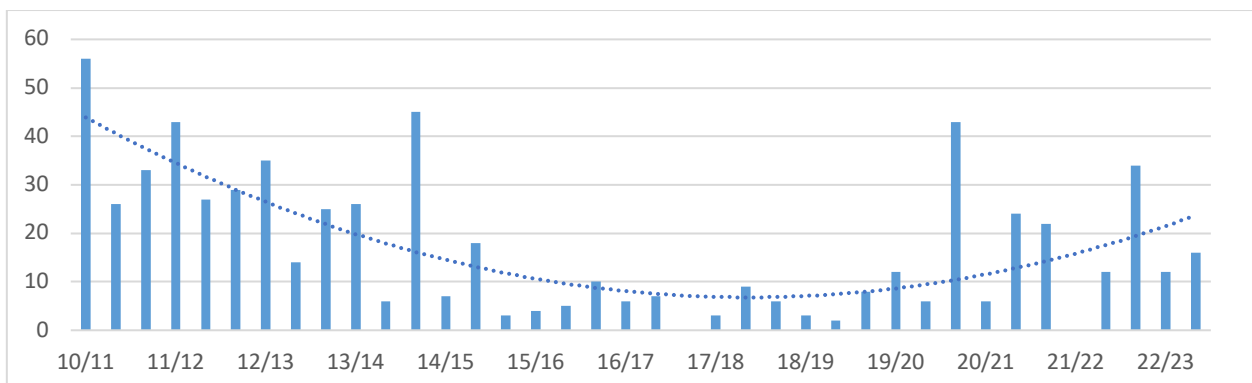
Buzzard



Similar to the breeding period, the Buzzard population appears to be stable or even growing slightly. Relying on "Road kill", Young rabbits and other carrion for food.

Green listed.

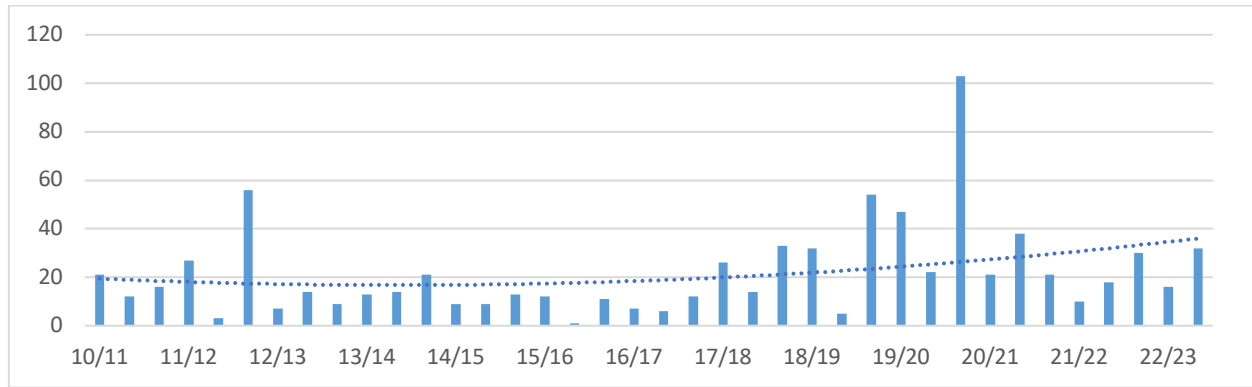
Grey Partridge



Grey Partridge numbers in winter have declined, probably due to the results of shooting until the outbreak of Covid when shooting was curtailed in 2020 and 2021. A healthy number remain to form the breeding birds for the following season.

Red listed.

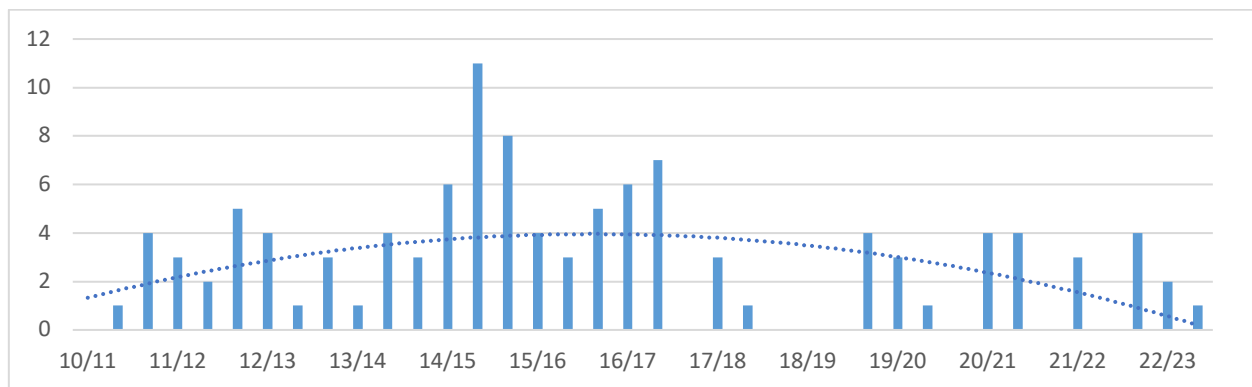
Pheasant



Pheasants will always be affected by the numbers shot during the season. The possible effects of Covid on shooting also show on this graph. Although there are no released birds here the wild birds present are sufficient to maintain a sustainable population.

Green listed.

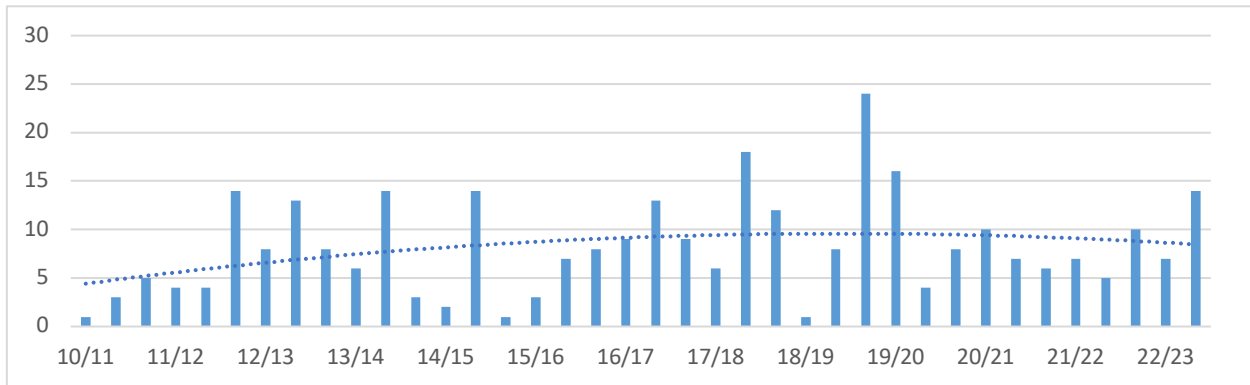
Wren



Wren populations always show big variations over relatively short periods. This survey started in 2010/11 when there had been two long periods of severe cold and complete snow cover. The Wren population had been reduced by an estimated 95%. A slow build up of numbers followed until the next period of bad weather arrived and numbers again collapsed in the winters of 2017 to 2019. Very wet conditions then were followed by a long dry period with little insect development in a late spring. From 2020 onwards the graphs show that there have been reduced numbers recorded during each winter period.

Amber listed.

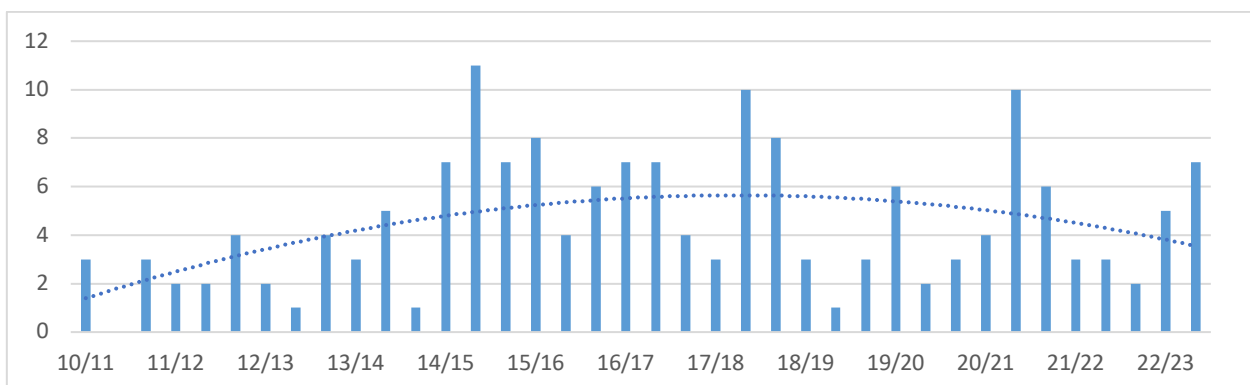
Dunnock



The winter of 2018/19 has shown to have had a poor effect on many of our winter residents and is seen again on this graph. Dunnocks feed largely on insects and other invertebrates but also to some extent on seeds in winter. There is some movement of Dunnocks, southwards in the winter months.

Amber listed.

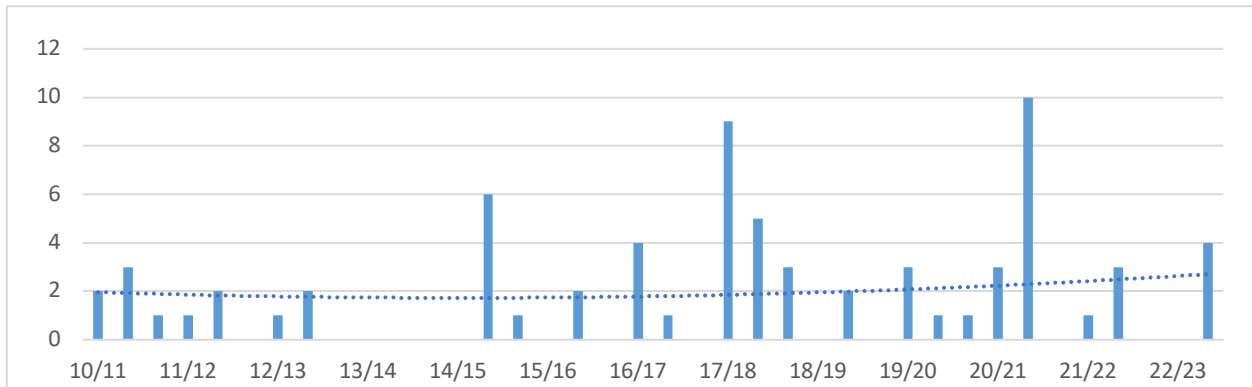
Robin



Robins are being recorded in gradually increasing numbers. Winter numbers will be affected by immigrants from the continent, in some years more than in others. Counts in winter are normally higher than in the breeding season since they are more vocal and more easily seen at this time.

Green listed.

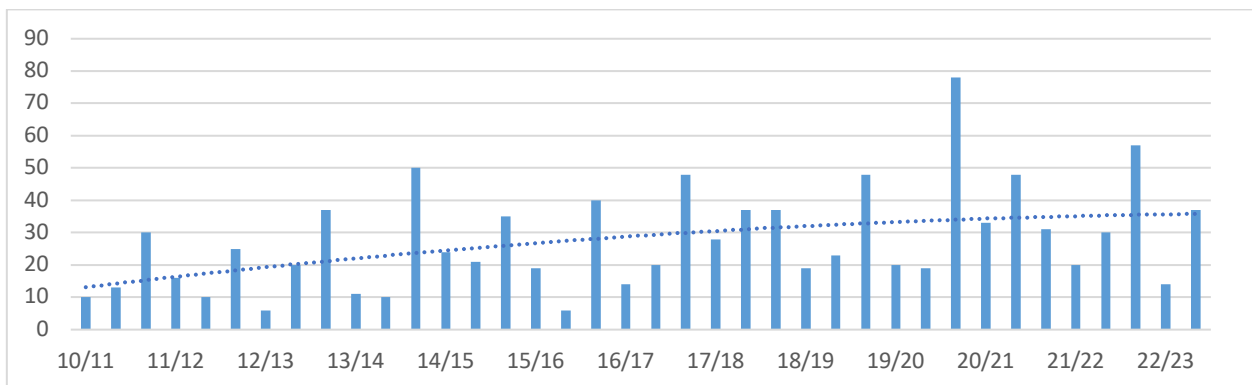
Song Thrush.



Very irregular counts during the winter period, they tend to be seen more in sheltered habitat such as game plots, woodland and urban areas rather than open arable land. A slow increase is indicated.

Red listed.

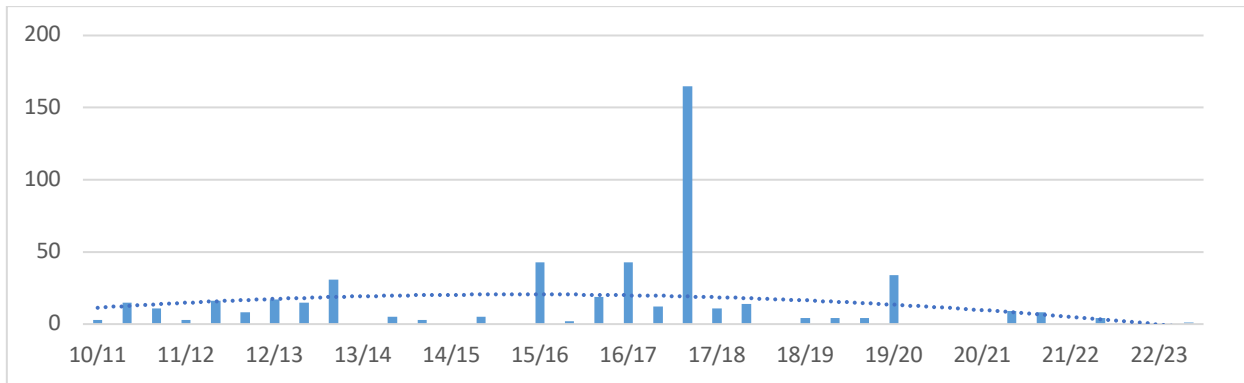
Blackbird



After a few years of gradual increase, the Blackbird population appears to have levelled off, but the increase has been higher than shown in the national figures.

Green listed.

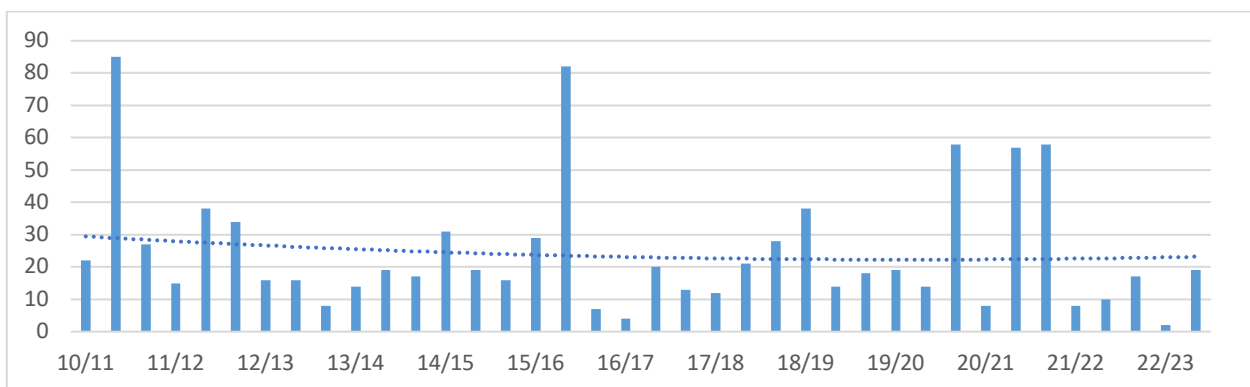
Tree Sparrow.



Winter counts are increased by immigrants from the continent and Scandinavia. Occasionally being recorded in large flocks but the numbers wintering in the survey area are reducing, leaving fewer birds to breed in this country.

Red listed.

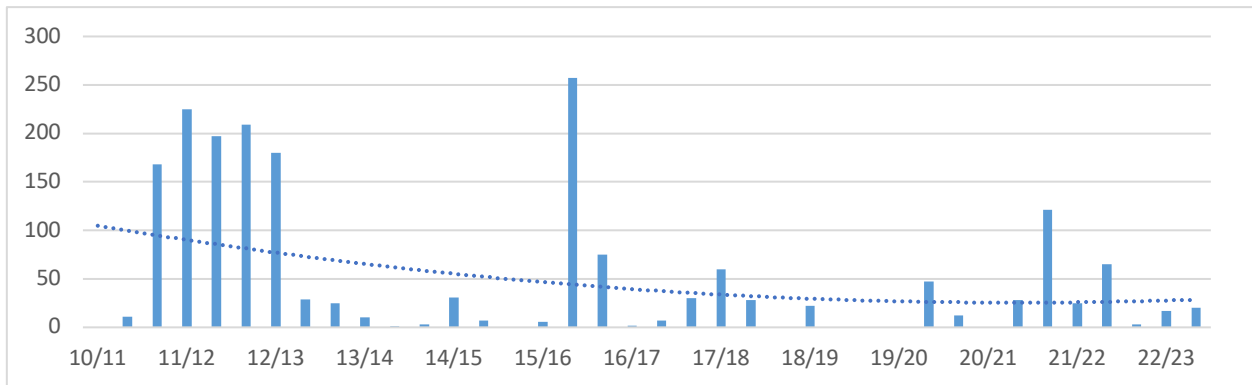
Chaffinch



Flocking in winter, usually with other finches in variable numbers. This also applies to all the following Finches.

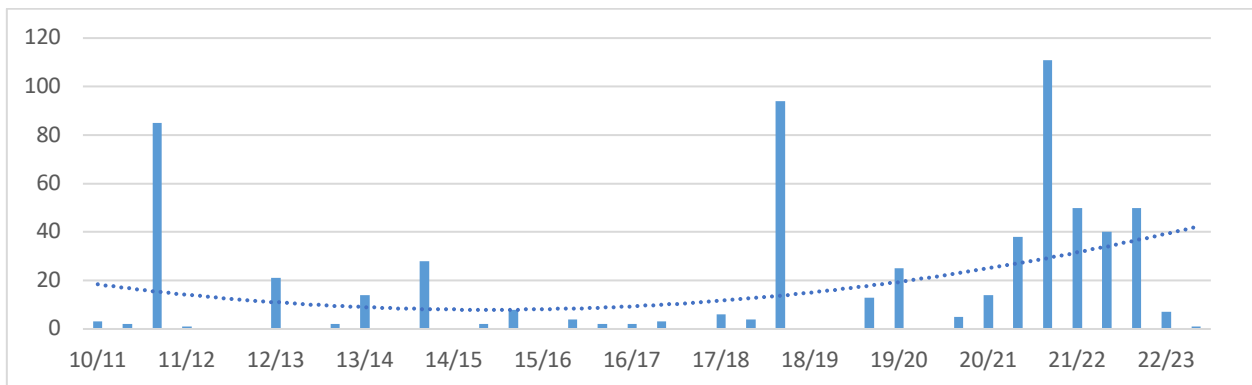
Green listed.

Linnet



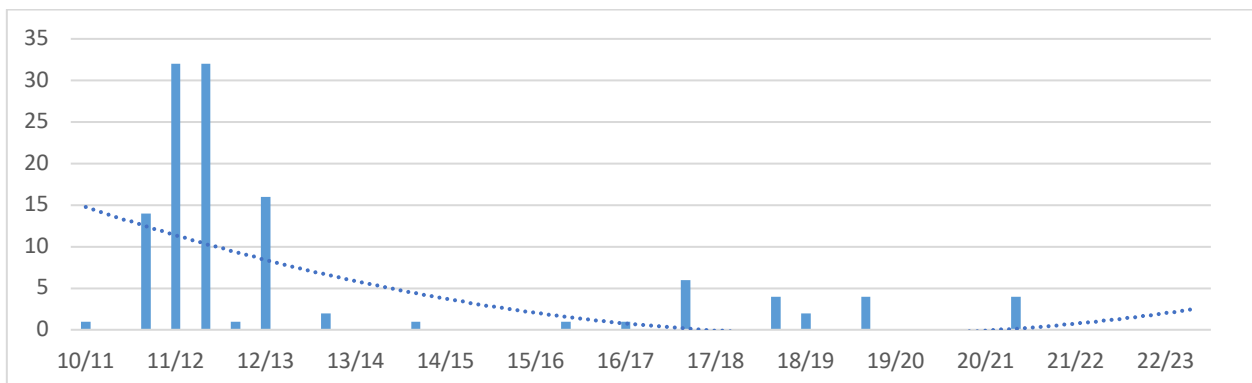
Red listed.

Goldfinch



Green listed.

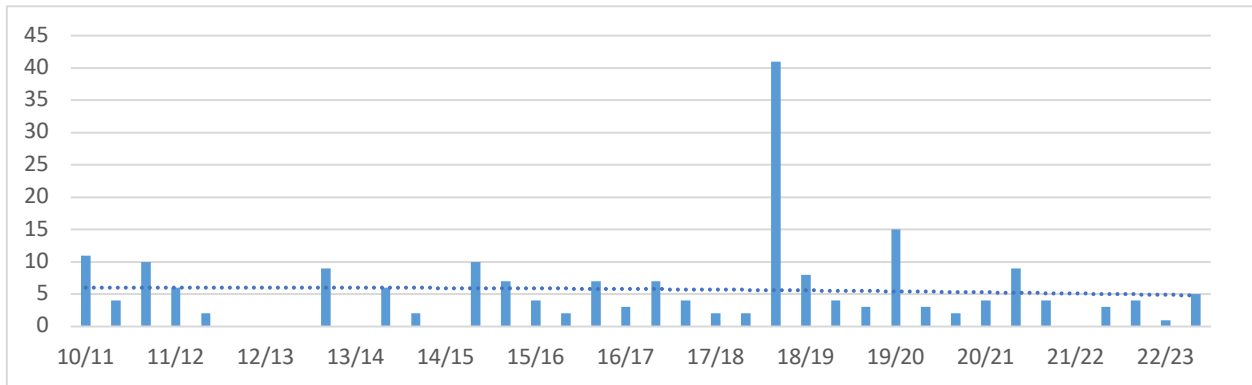
Greenfinch



Greenfinch numbers have been reduced by disease. Counts seem to be higher in urban areas.

Red listed.

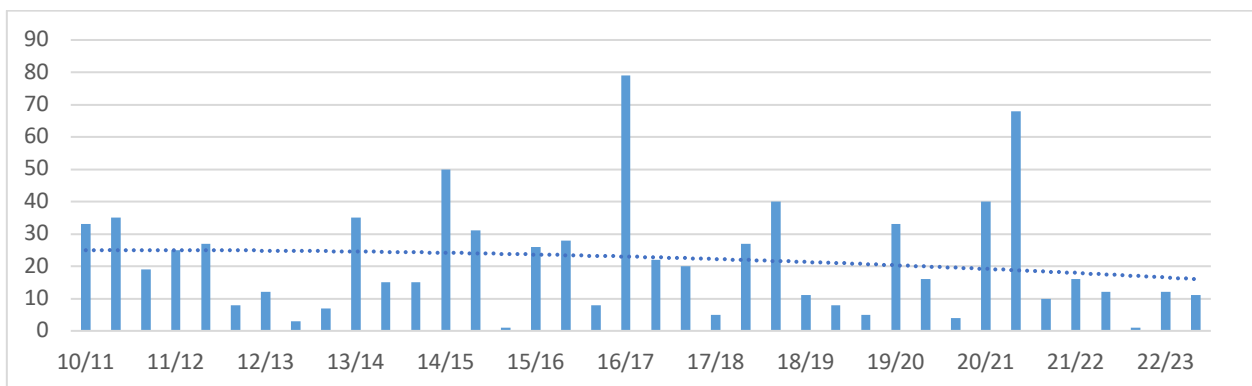
Reed Bunting



In winter more often seen in small numbers in mixed flocks of Finches.

Amber listed

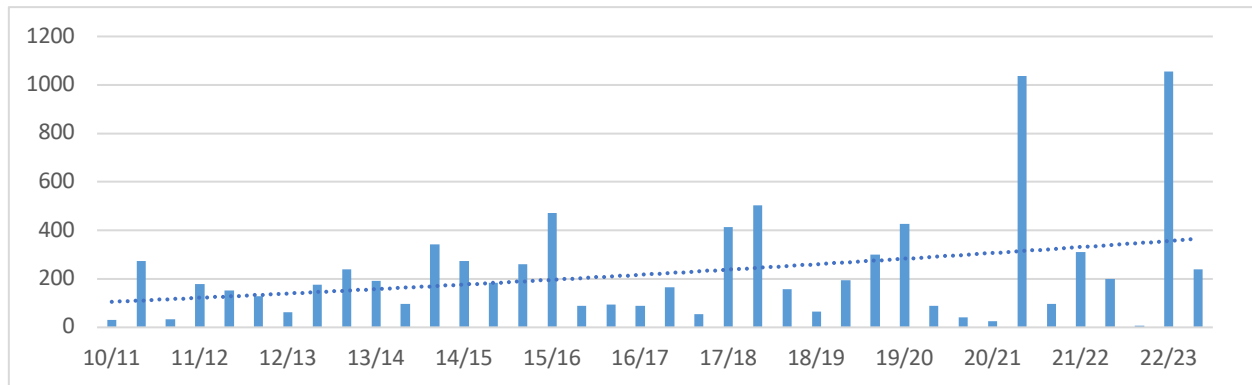
Yellowhammer



As for most of the finches, they are most commonly seen during the winter in larger flocks of seed feeders.

Red listed

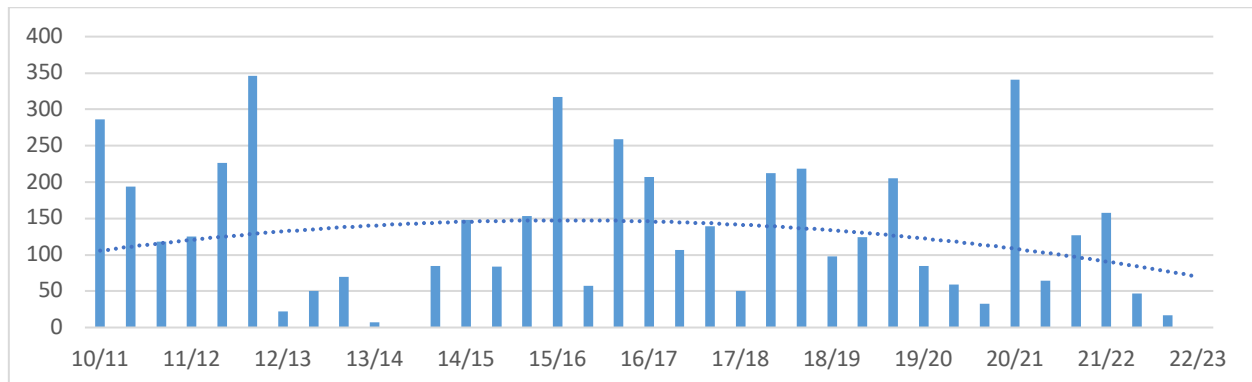
Woodpigeon



Winter numbers are increased by visiting birds from the Continent. The numbers arriving each winter depend to some extent on weather conditions on the Continent and in Scandinavia and the availability of food there. Crops of Oil Seed Rape are an attraction to Woodpigeons which can be recorded in very large numbers and do considerable damage.

Amber listed.

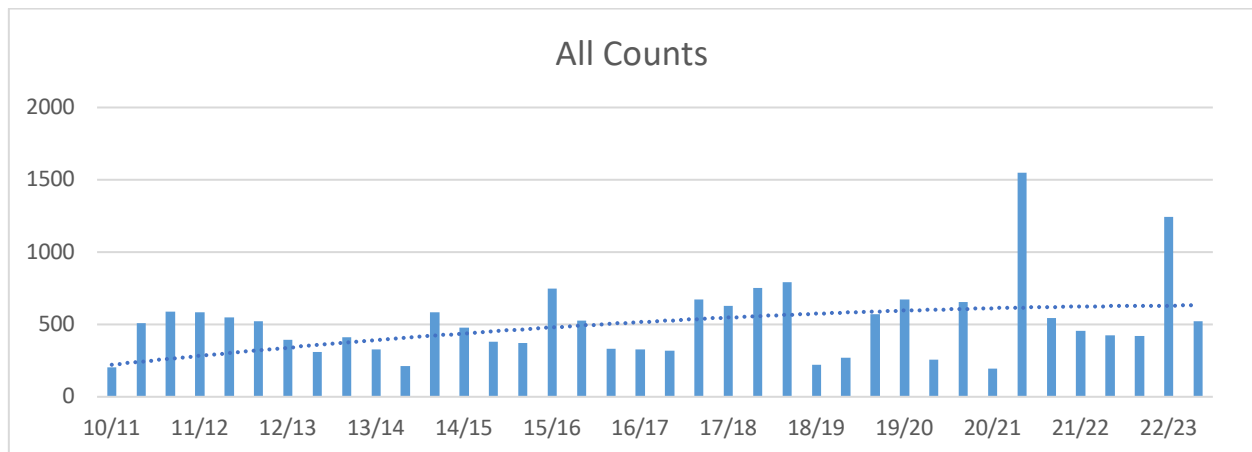
Curlew



The Curlew is not one of our target species, but the graph of its winter numbers is included here because in the early years of these surveys, Natural England asked to see our records for wintering Waders at Fieldhouse and Townfoot. As a result the tenant farmer of Fieldhouse was asked to retain or increase the amount of grassland on the farm, which he did. Now that the management of Fieldhouse has changed to Northumberland Estates, with the resultant increase in arable ground over grassland, it seemed worth while looking at the graph of Curlew counts made through the winter months. The result would seem to indicate that there has been a small reduction in counts but with Curlews using both arable and grassland areas.

Red listed.

Total of All Winter Period Counts (Target Species)



The results are similar to those of the breeding period, the total counts made in the late winter of 2018/19 have been the lowest for some time. The highest counts are mainly due to large influxes of Woodpigeons.

All the finch species above tend to flock together in winter to areas which provide food and shelter. The game plots on Fieldhouse and Townfoot provide good examples of this and at times high numbers of finches have been recorded here. It is often impossible to count the numbers of individual species and estimates have to be made. Any graphs made for these species are of little value.

Jim Clark. (July 2023)